

**Testimony of  
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**For**

**The U.S. House of Representatives  
Committee on Government Reform  
Subcommittee on the Federal Workforce and Agency Organization**

**Hearing on H.R. 4859  
“Federal Family Health Information Technology Act of 2006”**

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## Introduction

Thank you Chairman Porter, Representative Davis and distinguished members of the Committee for the opportunity to testify before you at today's hearing on how the use of health information technology can improve the health of federal employees and annuitants, and their families. I am Archelle Georgiou, Executive Vice President of Strategic Relations with Specialized Care Services (SCS), a specialty health and well-being division of UnitedHealth Group. UnitedHealth Group ([www.unitedhealthgroup.com](http://www.unitedhealthgroup.com)) is a diversified health and well-being company dedicated to improving the health care system and helping people achieve improved health and well-being through all stages of life. Headquartered in Minneapolis, Minnesota, UnitedHealth Group offers a broad spectrum of products and services through six operating businesses: UnitedHealthcare, Ovation, AmeriChoice, Uniprise, Specialized Care Services and Ingenix. Through its family of businesses, UnitedHealth Group serves approximately 65 million individuals nationwide.

UnitedHealth Group has extensive experience providing health care services to the federal government, state governments and private payers in many types of competitive environments. Currently, we offer health benefits to federal employees and annuitants under the Federal Employees Health Benefits Program in 14 states – Arizona, California, Colorado, Illinois, Iowa, Maryland, Missouri, Nevada, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, Texas, Virginia, Washington – and the District of Columbia. We have more than 322,000 members enrolled in our various FEHB plans. These plans include M.D. IPA in the Mid-Atlantic (DC, MD, VA), PacifiCare in the West (AZ, CA, CO, NV, OK, OR, TX, WA), UnitedHealthcare (CO, MO, OH) and John Deere Health Care (IL, IA). Through our various plans, we have been a carrier in the Federal Employees Health Benefits Program for over 20 years.

As Jeannine Rivet testified before this Subcommittee in March, UnitedHealth Group is a strong supporter of using health information technology to advance the quality of care provided to individuals and to improve the efficiency of our health care system. Over the past five years, we have invested \$2.5 billion on technology in an effort to bring simplicity and enhanced administrative efficiencies to the U.S. health care system. Our investment in technology allows us to apply a data-driven approach to provide plan members with information about the cost and effectiveness of different treatment options, as well as to help them find the highest-quality providers. Health care delivery remains complex and fragmented, and if critical information is not available at the point of care, medical errors, duplication and waste can result. Our technology supports automatic, seamless and patient-centered information flow, and it puts control of the information in the hands of the patient. We strongly believe that patient-empowered exchange of health care information will improve quality and affordability of care. Moreover, by preparing and encouraging patients to make informed health care decisions, they will maximize the value they receive for their health care dollar, enjoy better health and more easily manage their health care.

## **myuhc.com**

In 2000, UnitedHealthcare introduced its consumer service website, myuhc.com, to provide members with easy access to health information and services so that they can manage their health care effectively.

Members logging on to UnitedHealthcare's website can:

- Find providers designated under the UnitedHealth Premium<sup>SM</sup> program which identifies providers who meet objective quality and efficiency criteria based on claims-related data that compare physician complication rates and practice patterns with evidence-based medical guidelines
- Find information on hospital quality, including data on patient safety, length of stay, mortality, patient volume and complications for more than 150 procedures
- Order prescription refills online and compare the cost of drug alternatives
- Receive actionable information, based on their claims, related to improving the quality of their care and achieving cost savings. For example, members who have experienced heart attacks but have not filled prescriptions for beta blockers – which have proven efficacy in reducing future heart attacks – receive messages encouraging them to talk with their doctors about the benefits of beta blockers. Members who fill prescriptions for brand-name drugs receive messages indicating how much they could save by switching to equally effective generic alternatives.
- Receive monthly statements online providing explanations of benefits for all services

In March 2005, UnitedHealthcare expanded the functionality of myuhc.com, the consumer website by integrating personal health record capabilities that give consumers the ability to enter and track self-reported health information. In November 2005, the functionality was further expanded and members' claim based information was automatically pre-populated into their personal health record. Access to this information gives consumers control over their health data in order to inform and empower decision making. Easy access through myuhc.com offers a secure website which protects the privacy and security of members' data with user names and passwords, in keeping with industry authentication and validation standards.

Over the past year, our members have used their personal health records to:

- Enter and manage self-reported data, including tracking and charting of wellness, medical history, contacts with health care practitioners and notes/observations about their own health
- Enter and track self-reported clinical data, such as glucose levels and blood pressure, as well as information and lifestyle issues affecting health, such as weight and sleep habits

- Access a comprehensive record of their medical, surgical, radiology, pharmacy and laboratory health care claim history. This includes a two year summary of medical conditions, doctor visits and visit dates, medication history including all prescription names, dosage, and refill dates, laboratory and radiology tests including the date and location of the service.
- Capture personal and family contact data
- Print their personal health summary for their personal records and/or use with their practitioner

While the personal health record is available to all of our members, as of March 2006, 4.5 million consumers accessed their personal health record through our web portal, myuhc.com.

### **Personal Health Records Research**

In an effort to refine our personal health record and to make it more responsive to consumer and physician needs, in November 2005 we employed an independent research firm to conduct qualitative research on the personal health record concept and to determine the needs and interests of consumers. Through a number of in-depth telephone interviews and focus group sessions with consumers, physicians and employers/payers, the research revealed some interesting findings that have helped us to identify ways to make our personal health record even more useful to consumers and their doctors.

#### Consumers

We were very encouraged to learn through our research that the majority of consumers are positive toward the personal health record concept and are open to using it. In fact, according to this research, consumers see many advantages to such a service. Some of the specific key findings for this group include:

- Accessibility, portability and convenience are the key benefits of a personal health record to consumers. Having easy access to their medical records is highly valued, and consumers recognize that with a PHR they can take their information wherever they need it. They also think personal health records make managing their health care more convenient.
- Consumers generally believe a personal health record will help patient-physician interactions. They believe it would help their physician be more informed about their history. They see it as especially helpful for elderly patients or people with chronic conditions.
- Internet security and privacy are the primary concerns consumers have with personal health records. This concern is due in large part to the extremely sensitive – and vital – nature of health information that must be safeguarded against any form of abuse. That said, though, many consumers believe these security and privacy concerns can be

overcome through the use of multi-level passwords and the ability to designate who has access to what information.

- Consumers want the right to limit access to the information in their PHR; however, most indicated they would provide full access to their physician.
- Consumers are comfortable with a health plan providing or supporting this service.

Overall, assuming privacy issues are addressed and the service is free, most consumers indicate they would adopt a personal health records. The ability to easily access their records and the convenience it would provide are the primary motivators.

### Physicians

We found that awareness of personal health records is mixed among physicians. While several of the physicians in our studies said they have a general understanding of the concept, others were simply unaware of it. Once the concept was explained to them, they had the following reactions:

- Like consumers, physicians responded favorably to the concept. Easy access to patient health records provides two key benefits to physicians: accessibility will allow physicians to provide better care to patients, and easy access to patient records is expected to improve efficiency in physician practices.
- Physicians believe the key benefits of a PHR to consumers are better care, feeling more empowered and portability of their medical records. With doctors having more complete medical information, patients may have fewer problems with drug interactions, fewer tests repeated and a quicker resolution to their problem.
- Physicians' key concerns, like consumers, are privacy of patient data, as well as cost and accuracy of patient-entered data. Several expect it will be expensive to implement personal health records, and the idea of patients entering their own data received mixed reactions from physicians; they worry that patients may edit doctors' notes or enter incorrect data.
- Most physicians are opposed to allowing an "opt out" capability that would allow patients to block some information from being accessed by their health care provider.
- Most physicians we spoke with indicated they would be interested in adopting personal health records. Their main reasons for doing so are to obtain access to patient records and to achieve efficiencies in their practice.

### Employers

The research into employers' perceptions of personal health records revealed that there is little awareness of, and experience with, personal health records among employers. Moreover, we

found that employers tend not to see a clear or consistent benefit to them in making personal health records available to their employees, although they clearly see value for their employees and would encourage them to use the records. Other key findings include:

- They believe that having access to their medical records would allow employees to better manage their health care and keep track of doctor's visits, medications, etc.
- Some employers believe that employees may be more likely to use wellness, care management or preventative care services. They think that employees may become more aware of these services if tied to a personal health record and, consequently, may use them more often.
- They believe that confidentiality and security will be a key concern of employees.
- They are comfortable with health plans providing their employees with access to personal health records; they would view that as an added service by the plan.
- Employers desire ease of navigation, integrated reporting and more of an outcomes focus.

So overall, while employers are mixed on their likelihood to offer a personal health record for their employees, they clearly see the value to their employees and are comfortable with their health plans making personal health records available. They see consumer education on the ease of use, benefits, security and confidentiality as key to getting their employees to use personal health records.

### **Refinements to UnitedHealth Group's Personal Health Record**

In June 2006, members will have the option of giving selected physicians and family members access to their personal health records. Such access gives doctors a more comprehensive view of patients' health information than they would have from their own records so that they can provide care best suited to patients' needs, preferences and prior use of services. Members can grant their physicians access to their Personal Health Summary, a printable health summary detailing the most recent medical, surgical, radiology, pharmacy and laboratory health care claim history viewable online or through swipe card technology.

In addition, we plan to add more features such as allowing members to restrict access to certain portions of their records. We also will conduct member satisfaction surveys to identify how to continue to enhance the capabilities of the personal health record as well as to evaluate the extent to which personal health records are leading members to enroll in disease management and wellness programs, access UnitedHealthcare's 24-hour nurse advice line, use the nurse chat room function and undertake other activities that promote health and well-being.

## **Privacy and Security**

The privacy and security of personally identifiable information is of great concern to us all. If that information involves our specific medical needs and treatments, its sensitivity is even greater.

UnitedHealth Group currently protects members' privacy through the use of standard industry security measures such as user names and passwords. We are planning to add additional layers of protection to provide our members' with even greater assurance that their personal health records are completely secure.

In addition, we automatically suppress data on sensitive health issues such as sexually transmitted diseases, mental health, substance abuse, and reproductive health. We took this step of automatically suppressing this data to further protect privacy and to help gain member trust and acceptance of the personal health record feature.

The overall response to our consumer portal and personal health record capabilities has been extremely positive and, we feel, reflects a strong level of comfort on the part of members to the level of privacy and security offered.

## **Comments on H.R. 4859**

Specific to HR 4859, we do support your efforts with this bill and look forward to continuing to work with you and your staff as it moves through the legislative process. UnitedHealth Group believes that the use of appropriately-designed electronic personal health records will make a significant difference in improving health outcomes for Federal Employees Health Benefits Program (FEHBP) participants and will make it easier for them to manage their health care effectively.

We think personal health records can be particularly helpful for the many annuitants who participate in FEHBP. In the aggregate, this group tends to have more chronic conditions, which may mean multiple physicians and multiple prescription medications. Having access to a personal health record that provides easy access to their collective information will make it simpler for them, their care-givers and providers, to track and manage their conditions and health care needs. Since the FEHBP covers such a large member population, we believe requiring the use of electronic personal health records by program carriers and providers could have a significant impact on driving the entire industry forward on this important matter.

Moreover, the use of electronic personal health records could help reduce disparities in health care. As Speaker Gingrich stated in previous testimony before this Committee, participants for whom English is a second language would be better served by being able to provide their physician with access to their complete health care record, rather than having to try to explain complex medical issues in a second language. They also could provide access to their records to family members with greater proficiency in English to assist in their medical encounters.

If we may offer one cautionary comment as you move forward. There are a number of models of personal health records being offered to consumers. Since they are still an evolving feature of our health care system, no one knows for sure yet what approach will truly get consumers what they need and will use. However, our efforts and research have shown us that the most effective approach is a simplified approach. Therefore, as you move forward with your efforts to advance this critically important health care service, we would ask that you continue to provide flexibility for the market to determine what consumers want and what will get them fully engaged so that we can design and refine personal health records to best meet their needs.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, our experience in offering consumers a personal health record, as well as our research to determine the key needs of consumers as related to a personal health record, have enabled us to identify a number of requirements for facilitating widespread adoption. These requirements for success include:

- A strong and consistent information and education campaign that clearly shows the value of using a personal health record to the consumer
- A tailored consumer experience, organizing data and features in a manner that makes it easy to navigate and access information of choice, with health information displayed and described in ways that are easy to understand
- Secure and private infrastructures and processes
- Accurate and timely information to build trust and credibility
- Flexibility to address consumer needs, preferences and desires
- Health records fully integrated so that individuals have easy access to their PHR from the carrier's consumer portal and easy access back to the consumer portal from the PHR
- Interoperability with provider office technology

Chairman Porter, we appreciate your continued leadership in this matter and commend you and the Members of this subcommittee for your appreciation of the benefits and value that health information technology can bring to the quality, efficiency and effectiveness of health care.

We are confident that the use of appropriately-designed personal and electronic health records will make a significant difference in improving health outcomes for individuals and will make it easier for them to manage their health care effectively. Again, we appreciate your leadership on this very important matter and thank you for the opportunity to share our experiences in offering a carrier-based personal health records. I would be happy to answer any questions you might have for me.